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Global Justice Academy Blog

Global Justice Academy, University of Edinburgh

Out of Serbia

Posted on **March 14, 2016** by **Harriet Cornell**

*This post was first published on the author's **Remotely Balkan blog**, and is re-blogged here with permission.*

This post is by Laura Wise. Laura is an Analyst on the Global Justice Academy's Political Settlements Research Programme. Her research interests include minority mobilisation, state-society relations, and conflict management in South-Eastern Europe.



— Röske,
Vasfüggönnyel a
bevándorlók ellen.
Képen: Szögesdrót a
röszei
határátkelőnél.
fotó: Segesvári Csaba

The Balkan Express is no more.

Replaced by luxury international coaches from Vienna to Sarajevo, with on-board toilets that work, Wi-Fi, and conductors who serve drinks, gone are the potholed, unreliable minibus journeys that make classic travellers' tales for the Western backpacker. Last month I made a fleeting visit back to the Balkans; the kind of trip where you spend hours on the aforementioned buses just to meet friends for coffee. It was also a chance to reunite with **rakia**, and revisit bars where the pop-folk of Dado Polumenta is an acceptable choice of music. However, most of my conversations and experiences kept returning to a more sobering topic: Europe.

The integration debate in the Balkans is nothing new. But since I left Serbia last year, the ideals and assumptions that my generation always took for granted in the European Union have begun to crumble, one by one. Whilst countries and people queue to enter, the UK considers Brexit, debating the matter in terms of which option will keep the most "others" out of this green and pleasant land. And as the EU integration process is privately given up for all but dead by Western

Balkan pundits, the consequences of increasingly restricted borders becomes a bigger concern for the nature of EU conditionality, and its relationship to migration on the edge of Europe.



In February, Austria began to **unilaterally limit** the number of refugees who can claim asylum daily, a further blow to the Schengen dream, and one which caused panic further down the Western Balkans migration route. Faced with becoming a waiting room for refugees barely treated as human, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia have followed suit with restrictions of their own. Inspired by common decency and their personal experiences of displacement in the 1990s, communities in the Balkans had previously extended greater respect to their fellow mankind than the desired destinations in Western and Northern Europe, although this goodwill was not guaranteed to last.

Ever the pragmatist, in an **interview** with BBC Newsnight earlier this year, Prime Minister Alexander Vucic went to great pains to emphasise that Serbia has had the most compassionate and "European" response to refugees, by facilitating free passage through its territory and not using tear gas against vulnerable people (having learned a valuable lesson in PR from the horrific scenes at the Greek-Macedonian border last year). But he goes on to promise that if the directive from Brussels would be to close the border and return migrants to Macedonia, then rally the riot-police! For Europe's wish is Serbia's command. Perhaps Vucic could ask Vetevendosje (Self-determination) party leader Albin Kurti to borrow some tear gas from the ongoing Kosovo Assembly **protests**, thus bringing an exciting twist to the Pristina-Belgrade normalization dialogue.

Of course, the Copenhagen-plus criteria for Balkan entry to the EU has not yet been termed as a trade-off for acting as a buffer zone against the thousands of desperate people seeking shelter in Europe from war, violence, and poverty. But with the latest EU **"plan"** appearing to be little more than a 'visa liberalisation for migrants' deal with Turkey, the potential rewards available to candidate states in the Balkans for "closing" the Western Balkans migration route might not go unconsidered by political leaders such as Vucic, who is, when it comes to migration, truly European.



Despite some truly disturbing experiences in Vienna – apparently Nazi salutes are back – the most surreal moment of the trip was the ease of crossing these precarious border zones. Rows of shiny new barbed wire are visible, but not for us European passport holders is the experience of waiting for hours in a field without basic facilities. The efficiency and banality of our mobility is palpable. Waiting at a checkpoint, my fellow passengers smoke and discuss the latest developments in Austria, and an outspoken Serbian woman reassures the group that the changes are "not because of us, but because



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of them". Whilst tired young men sitting in Vienna's Hauptbahnhof are racially profiled for identification, our white faces are barely looked at by the Hungarian border guards who wave us through. Our European-ness having been validated, the coach drives off, more coffee is served, and I am once again out of the Balkans, with no idea what this border will be like when I return.

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